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ABSTRACT

As a learner-oriented approach, Gattegno's "Silent Way" has recently been receiving much attention in the teaching of English as a second language. Whereas the cognitive approach to the teaching of language deserves praise, an integral aspect of Gattegno's method includes the introduction of a 37-color alphabet, used in a one-to-one phonics approach now out of favor among reading specialists. There is an inconsistency between Gattegno's rule-oriented approach to syntax and the patternless memorization of color-grapheme correspondences. While there is much good in Gattegno's cognitive approach and subordination of teaching to learning, there is an equal danger of "seeing red" with his colors. (Author)

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On Seeing Red With the 'Silent Way'

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As a learner-oriented approach, Gattegno's 'Silent Way' has recently been receiving much attention in ESL. Whereas the cognitive approach to the teaching of language deserves praise, an integral aspect of Gattegno's method includes the introduction of a 37-color alphabet, used in a one-to-one phonics approach now out of favor among reading specialists. There is an inconsistency between Gattegno's rule-oriented approach to syntax and the patternless memorization of color-grapheme correspondences. While there is thus much good in Gattegno's cognitive approach and subordination of teaching to learning, there is an equal danger of seeing red with his colors!

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In numerous workshops and conferences Gattegno's methodology, the 'Silent Way', has been drawing increased attention. As disillusionment with the audio-lingual method has grown, so has interest in silence increased, and thus has swung the pendulum---from too much talk to very little. Various treatments, e.g. Stevick 1976 and Varvel 1979, have focused on this use of silence, yet Gattegno's color orthography, seemingly such an integral aspect of the methodology, has received scant attention.

Hines at the Boston TESOL meeting (1979) noted in a plenary session address that Gattegno's attention to the subordination of teaching to learning was to be commended. Again there was no mention of color, but she did emphasize that Gattegno's respect for the learner had had a long history which included Socrates and Montaigne.² Gattegno's view of language has also a history: although Gattegno acknowledges few debts, his views are similar in many respects to those of Chomsky (with corresponding historical antecedents) and are thus opposed to the behaviorist philosophy. Gattegno's concept of the learning process---the generation of sentences from rules formulated by the learner---is thus in sharp contrast to the mim-mem or audio-lingual school.

There is, however, a contradiction between Gattegno's concept of language and his use of color orthography. In one of his charts he lists all the possible spellings for his color phonemes; as Fry (1972:393) notes, 'learning the

270 letter combinations would appear to be a totally mechanical approach to beginning reading.³ Gattegno's approach to syntax may be rule-oriented, but his phonology and orthography require memorization rather than the application of rules.

The system works essentially as follows: the emphasis on silence is to get the student (rather than the teacher) to formulate the rules of the language; since there is minimal sound stimulus, the students learn to use the sounds through a color stimulus, using in essence an inventory of color phonemes. As words are learned through sequences of colors, the students through trial and error devise by themselves the rules of syntax. Both pronunciation and the orthography are taught through a color medium.

This paper will first of all criticize the need for any such use of color and, secondly, demonstrate that the system of colors itself is ill-conceived and inconsistent.

An obvious difficulty entailed by the use of color is the learning disadvantage incurred by those with color vision deficiencies: surveys of the National Center for Health Statistics show that 6.95% of boys (although only .53% of girls) in the 6-11 year age bracket have a color vision deficiency (Scanlon and Roberts 1972); a similar survey (Slaby and Roberts 1974) among boys in the 12-17 age group showed a 7.5% figure. According to Post 1962 the

figures for Western European white males range from 8 to 10% (the percentage among black males is slightly lower). Gattegno (1969:81), however, maintains that color blindness poses no problem since it 'is taken care of by the shapes and shades and other clues that colorblind people develop spontaneously'⁴ Yet even with normal vision, the discrimination of 37 colors is difficult for many persons--- in one area of the spectrum, for example, one must distinguish blue, pale blue, royal blue, sky blue, turquoise, and cobalt blue!

1. Orthographies and reading methods. Developed in 1957, 'Words in Color' was designed to teach reading rather than ESL, yet curiously enough the impact on reading specialists has been minimal. In contrast to 'What We Owe Children: the Subordination of Teaching to Learning' (1970), Gattegno's 'Teaching Reading With Words in Color (1968) and similar books have passed almost unnoticed. It seems strange that reading specialists have so little heeded someone now receiving so much attention in ESL.

Irrespective of the controversy over the phoneme in theoretical linguistics, there are few who deny the usefulness of the minimal pair in the ESL classroom. Pike 1947 suggested that one was on safe ground with the phoneme only in inventing orthographies. But whereas it is relatively easy to invent an orthography, it is a complicated undertaking to use a phonemic inventory to describe the English orthography.

Gattegno is attempting to teach through color both spoken and written English.

Gattegno objects to having his color phonemes called an alphabet, but that is of course exactly what they are. Indeed, by the time a learner of ESL starts writing English, he may be on his third orthography. The student, for example, is shown the colors mauve and white and introduced to /fa/. If he is familiar with the Arabic script, his immediate association would be . Eventually he must learn to associate these colors with the graphemes fa. But why the intermediate step?

If there is no desire to introduce a phonemic transcription based on the Roman orthography (which is one more hurdle prior to learning English spelling), the student familiar with the Arabic orthography could be given

فاذر وينت سكرول

to be quickly read as 'Father went to school'. To the Westerner it is unorthodox to see Arab children learning to read English in the Arabic script---such is the psychological attachment to one's orthography.⁵

When Fries 1945 emphasized that second language learning was similar to the first in that emphasis was in both cases on the spoken language, audio-lingual purists withheld the printed word from their students, to the frustration of those who had spent years of learning to learn through the written language. Literacy, however, is a memory crutch which should be used.

Numerous methods for teaching reading have been suggested (see Aukerman 1971), and for every suggestion one finds enthusiastic proponents. We find the one-to-one phonics approach, as exemplified in Gattegno's color scheme, the i/t/a/, UNIFON, and the Laubach method, and at the other end of the spectrum an emphasis on contextual clues, which includes more attention to syntax and ideational meaning (the language experience approach). In between these we find the phonics-linguistic approach (gaining in popularity for some time now), which examines not only the phoneme-grapheme correspondences, but more especially the patterns of graphemes, for example the effect of tt in written as opposed to t in writing. In the look-and-say approach there is relative stress on whole-word recognition; in this category we find the famous basal readers used by the majority of American schools (exemplified years ago by the McGuffey readers), but now attacked in the popular 'Why Johnny Can't Read' (Flesch 1955), espousing in turn a more phonics-linguistic approach.

The level of reading ability to a great degree will determine the approach; contextual clues, for example; provide some initial introduction to reading (children read advertising) but do not replace early phonics-linguistic instruction. Although much eclecticism is found, reading specialists have shown little support for the one-to-one phonics as used by Gattegno. The Goodmans 1976 would advise such an approach not be emphasized even to learn

reading an orthography with a nearly perfect phoneme-grapheme correspondence (e.g. Turkish).

Rapid reading requires greater attention to contextual clues. It is curious that in an examination of the Goodman and Gattegno philosophies (excluding the colors) Mitchell 1978 found many similarities, for example the emphasis on learning through reader mistakes. The crucial difference, however, lay in the fact that the Gattegno-trained teacher interrupted the student immediately upon hearing a mistake; the Goodman approach with its psycholinguistic framework would only question 'miscues' in idea comprehension. In effect, the Gattegno student read word by word, the Goodman student idea by idea.

2. Colors and phonemes. To teach the sounds and orthography of English, Gattegno distributes charts; the first is a representation of 58 rectangles, consisting of 37 one-color blocks and 21 two-color blocks (/ay/, for example, is represented as white in the top half, pale pink in the bottom half). One next proceeds to charts of high frequency words, all spelled in colored graphemes; blue, for example, is spelled with a dark green b, a royal blue l, and ue is leaf green. The third kind of chart is an index of all the colors, like the first chart, but now showing in turn each way in which the colors may be orthographically represented.

In a Tucson, Arizona demonstration (February 9-11, 1979) of the applicability of using the Silent Way to teach ESL, a native speaker of Spanish was asked to give the five 'pure' vowels of Spanish. We then learned to associate the colors red, blue, white, leaf green, and brown respectively with the sounds (on the chart made for English) of /i/, /E/, /a/, /u/, and /o/. As Gattegno flicked his pointer over the first chart of colored rectangles, we learned some of the consonant colors and began practicing the association of colors with do, re, mi, etc. On learning other vowels, we discovered that we had been saying /rey/ rather than /rE/, yet re in English is, of course, pronounced /rey/. According to his chart, however, Gattegno does not believe in the rule which permits only tense and diphthongized vowels in final position; similarly he believes the final vowel of honey, beauty, chassis, and chamois to be /I/ rather than /iy/.

Gattegno uses no transcription, yet his colored vowel phonemes are the approximate equivalent of those in the included chart. The portrayal here is somewhat inaccurate in that /E/, /A/, /o/, and /a/ are accorded respectively one color when followed by /r/ (although an alternate pronunciation for laugh is also placed with the before-/r/ /a/). A smattering of other 'alternate pronunciations' is allowed for, e.g. pale blue/ pale aqua or /hw/ as in pronunciations of where, and there is a medial [d] in water, presumably for American speakers.

i		u
I		U
ey	^ (stressed)	ow
E	ə (unstressed)	
ae	a	ɔ

E(r)	^ (r)	a (r)	o (r)
ay	aw	ɔy	

Vowel phoneme representations

The vowels before /r/ are handled inconsistently. Supposedly the vowels /E/, /A/, /ow/, and /a/ are modified before /r/, whereas /u/ and /i/ are not. Thus separate colors are used for the vowels respectively in the pairs:

<u>pu</u> n	<u>pu</u> rr
<u>pe</u> n	<u>pe</u> ar
<u>po</u> ne	<u>po</u> re
<u>pa</u> wn	<u>pa</u> r

Yet vowel colors remain unchanged between moon and moor, and between feed and fear. Stranger still, while few might be transcribed /fyu/, cure is colored as /kyUr/, in which the vowel coincides with that in /lUk/ (look). Apparently, however, moor is transcribed in colors representing /mur/. His rule is thus: /u/ → /U/ /y_r/.

Another inconsistency is that he notes the diphthongs /ey/ and /ow/ but fails to diphthongize /i/ and /u/.

He strikes an awkward compromise between the syllabic consonant and the practice of including a vowel in every syllable. For example, rather than use the appropriate color(s) respectively for either /l/ or /əl/ (as in simple), his compromise is to introduce a symbol of two colors (top and bottom), yellow (unstressed /ə/) and royal blue (/l/). He uses this same two-color combination for l in wild and another such combination for the r in iron or fire (but not as in buyer?); he does not list ol as in symbol, however, since he colors the schwa and l here in separate letters.

In addition to Bloomfield's syllabic /r/, /l/, /m/, and /n/ (1933:122), Gattegno has added /z/. This syllabic consonant analysis is extremely arbitrary, as was pointed out as far back as Chao 1934.

There is a second chart, which consists of high frequency words, written according to the respective color-grapheme correspondences. It is at this stage that the famous 'cuisenaire' rods are used, apparently so as not to encumber syntax with meaning.

In Gattegno's third chart the task becomes indisputably more difficult; the attempt is made to list every spelling of a sound as represented by each color. Typically one color must represent various sequences of more than one grapheme. We note, for example, that there are fifteen line-colored graphemic representations for /s/, including sth as in isthmus, ps as in psalm, etc. There are other instances wherein two phonemes are represented by only one grapheme, as in the u for /yu/ in use (/yuz/) or x for /ks/ in box (/baks/); in such instances two-color (top and bottom) combinations are used. However, whereas /wΛ-/ is shown as pale aqua (/w/) and pale yellow (/Λ/) in two separate letters for won, these same phonemes must be represented as a two-color combination for the o in one. One inconsistency is that while /j/ is regarded as a two-color cluster in /dʒ/, there is no parallel treatment for /č/.

With examples cited such as phthisic, nasturtium, phthalein, adieu, and jose [sic], there appears to be no

limit to the 408 grapheme representations already listed. The Pandora's box of foreign words has been opened; Gattegno posits no boundaries, and there are therefore no exceptions.⁶

This is no orthographic novelty, such as G. B. Shaw's ghotl ('fish'), but rather a serious teaching endeavor. The anomalies are included among all the regularities: we see that bu represents /b/ as in buy, that lo represents /r/ as in colonel, and that thes is the correspondence for /z/ in clothes. The graphemic representations are listed with no attempt, as Gattegno admits, at any frequency count. There is no system of predictability, no study of clusters and word origins or patterns and positioning. Once the student has learned the sound equivalence of ct in indict, he is presumably prepared for the /t/ in ctenoid. The student must simply note that /t/ is written in these many ways, irrespective of frequency.

When someone pointed out that the learner should make use of the effect of iC versus iCe in, for example, bit and bite, the rejoinder was how to account for give. Again, in effect, there are no exceptions to Gattegno's listing because there are no rules. The student must memorize the spelling of each word; without the colors he has no rules to fathom the pronunciation of an unknown word. Such is the consequence of a one-to-one phonics system.

3. Final remarks. His attempted accuracy and thoroughness only gets Gattegno into trouble. Teachers

traditionally have found it an easy thing to skip a minimal pair exercise that might teach, for example, /kɔt/ and /kat/ (respectively caught and cot), a vague distinction in my dialect. However, in Gattegno's attempt to devise a system 1) that could be used on both sides of the Atlantic, 2) that is trying to affix the variances of dialect to the relative permanence of spelling, and 3) that is even designed to teach remedial reading to speakers of non-standard dialects---there is obviously much of what is both useless and confusing. One instance of such an attempt forces him to concoct a special two-colored rectangle to take care of only one word---the /wa/ found in some pronunciations of reservoir. It is reminiscent of the nightmare that spa (with a non-tense final vowel) gave Chomsky and Halle 1968.

Chomsky and Halle, however, expressed several times their admiration for the system of English orthography. Indeed, it has to be a remarkable system which with a limited number of vowel graphemes can come up with enough variations to convey three times the number of sounds, e.g. the famous 'silent e' in ripe as compared to rip, and at the same time our idiosyncratic orthography knows when not to differentiate, so that the morphemes {krɪtɪk}, {neɪʃən}, and {ləɪn}, for example, are more easily recognizable because their spellings do not change---even though their pronunciations do (i.e. critic, criticize, nation, national, line, linear).

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Despite the commendable emphasis on the learner, the Silent Way equally entails the learning of this difficult intermediary alphabet, itself an inconsistent system of phoneme correspondences. Let us make use of Gattegno's philosophy of education but avoid his adventure into colors. Secondly, let us preferably use the resources of our own scripts in learning a second language, or, painful as is the process, let us begin directly with the new script. And finally, let us teach reading a first or second language through rules rather than through a one-to-one phonics approach.

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Footnotes

¹I would like to thank William Acton (U. of Houston) for his criticism and suggestions. The opinions expressed are nevertheless my responsibility.

²And the use of color has had a history. At the turn of the century a Nellie Dale introduced a reading method which was 'quite similar' to Gattegno's (Aukerman 1971:357). These 'Walter Crane Readers' (named after the illustrator) were never widely circulated and are now confined to a very few rare book rooms.

³There are 408 [!] letter combinations in the 1975 chart.

⁴Yet publishers have problems! Textbooks cannot be published because of the prohibitively expensive cost of color printing.

⁵Note texts teaching, for example, Hindi, Arabic, Cambodian, or Japanese; if the author is a native literate of such a language, the new orthography is introduced almost immediately. If the author is a native literate of a language written in the Roman script, the foreign orthography is usually introduced only very gradually.

⁶Listing omissions is an absurd though tempting exercise. No provision has been made for the gu for /w/ in saguaro, the cz for /z/ in czar, the agh for /i/ in shillelagh, the sne for /n/ in demesne, the g for /h/ in gila (monster), the zz for /ts/ in pizza, the ts for /ð/ in catsup, the oup for /u/ in coup, the ei for /ay/ in deictic (except as an alternate of either), the gn for /ny/ in lorgnette, and there are many more!

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